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ABSTRACT

A study examined the history of racial labelling of Black Americans, from the perspective of their changing material condition and opinions concerning use of the term "African American." Using the paradigm that language is representative of a social construction of reality drawn from linguistics and sociology, use of the terms "African," "colored," "Negro," "Black," and "African American" is chronicled, focusing on societal forces and the relationship of Blacks to American society. Survey methodology and results are then discussed. The survey was conducted in 1989 in Atlanta (Georgia), Chicago (Illinois), Cincinnati (Ohio), Detroit (Michigan), and Philadelphia (Pennsylvania). Of 667 respondents, including both African and European Americans, 512 responded to the question "Do you think the term 'African American' should replace the term 'Black' as the name for Black people in the United States?" Results show just over one-third to one-half support a shift to "African American." Three broad explanations were offered by Blacks for approving the change: identification of dual heritage; inadequacy of the "color" label; aesthetic quality of the newer term. Three explanations were given for disapproval: Blacks are not African; syllabic density; no need for change. Demographic differences in responses were also revealed. Contains 35 references. (MSE)

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"WHAT IS AFRICA TO ME?": LANGUAGE, IDEOLOGY AND "AFRICAN AMERICAN"

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INTRODUCTION

What is Africa to me
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black,
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

--Countee Cullen, 1925[1]

The relationship of Black Americans to "Mother Africa" is being raised anew and in a broad public forum as the national Black community struggles with the call to move from the racial designation "Black" to "African American." Because of Reverend Jesse Jackson's widespread popularity, many have assumed him to be the catalyst for the current linguistic change. However, it was actually Dr. Ramona Edelin, President of the National Urban Coalition, who, in late 1988, proposed that the upcoming 1989 summit be called the "African American Summit" because the semantics "would establish a cultural context for the new agenda" (quoted in Lacayo and Monroe 1989). Taking up Edelin's call at the December 1988 news conference to announce the Summit, Jackson indicated that "just as we were called colored, but were not that...and then Negro, but not that...to be called Black is just as baseless," and further, like other groups of Americans, African Americans want to link their heritage to the land of their origin (quoted in Page 1989).

The issue of racial semantics set in motion by Edelin,

Jackson, and others has generated far greater national publicity and media attention than the Summit itself. In addition to extensive coverage by The New York Times, articles have appeared in Time, The Chicago Tribune, The Washington Post, several metropolitan dailies across the country, and in Ebony, Essence, and other African American media. CBS "Nightwatch" News hosted an hour-long panel discussion on the issue.[2] Even Ann Landers (1989) devoted attention to the question, publishing responses in one column and indicating in another column that African American "seems appropriate because it gets away from color and designates origin instead. I hope it catches on." As recently as 28 October 1990, The Washington Post National Weekly Edition featured the issue in a column by Michael Specter headlined "Men and Women of Their Word: But should that word be 'Black' or 'African American'?" (10). And in December, 1990, as I was writing this article, Rosemary Bray dealt with this topic in a special section of Essence.

Inasmuch as the current linguistic movement is complexified by the dynamics of race, there are bound to be cases of uncertainty as well as confusion. Lexicographers, such as those at Random House, and the mainstream press, such as the Associated Press and The New York Times, are waiting for a consensus among speakers and writers before establishing a policy decision on Black versus African American. Although the U.S. Census Bureau did not use "African American" as a category on the 1990 census form--reportedly because the call for change was issued too late to be included (Wilkerson

1989)--the Bureau did add special instructions to the form indicating that "Black" or "Negro" includes "African Americans." Humorous instances of linguistic confusion are starting to crop up, as these two examples indicate:

> We, the Black African American people will soon rise to our God-given greatness--if we just hold on to His unchanging hand.
> (Banquet speaker at an African American church, 22 September 1990, Detroit)

> An item in Thursday's Nation Digest about the Massachusetts budget crisis made reference to new taxes that will help put Massachusetts "back in the African American." The item should have said "back in the black."
> (The Fresno Bee, 21 July 1990, 12A)

This article seeks to illuminate the age-old question of a name for the enslaved African population of the United States and its emancipated descendants. Two dimensions of the question will be presented: (1) the history of racial labelling from the perspective of the changing material conditions of Blacks; and (2) contemporary opinions about the use of African American based on the author's five-city survey of public opinion about language matters.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

This study is informed by the paradigm, in linguistics, of "language as social semiotic" (Halliday 1978) and the theoretical framework, in sociology, of the "social construction of reality"

(Berger and Luckmann 1966). Following Berger and Luckmann's contention that language constitutes the most important content and instrument of socialization, I will here summarize an argument I've made extensively elsewhere (Smitherman 1980, 1983, 1989): reality is not merely socially, but socio-linguistically constructed. Real-world experience and phenomena do not exist in some raw, undifferentiated form. Rather, reality is always filtered, apprehended, encoded, codified, and conveyed via some linguistic shape. This linguistic form exists in a dialectical relationship with social cognition and social behavior. While Humboldtian linguists (and most Whorfians, for that matter) overstate the case for language as the determiner of thought, consciousness and behavior, nonetheless, language does play a dominant role in the formation of ideology, consciousness, and class relations. As Voloshinov put it, "ideology is revealed in a word" (1929, 70). Thus my contention is that consciousness and ideology are largely the products of what I call the sociolinguistic construction of reality.

For African Americans, the semantics of race have been recurring themes in our sociolinguistic constructions of reality since 1619, when the first cargo of African slaves landed at Jamestown. The societal complexity of the Black condition continues to necessitate a self-conscious construction of identity. Notwithstanding historical, cultural and cosmological linkages with Continental and Diasporic Africans and, further, notwithstanding similarities between American slavery and slavery in other

historical epochs, the African American, as James Baldwin once put it, is a unique creation. Whereas other African peoples lay claim to national identity in countries where the population is "Black"--e.g., Jamaicans, Ghanains, Bajans, Nigerians--African Americans claim national identity in a country where most of the population is non-Black. After being emancipated and granted citizenship, there were (and continue to be) profound implications for a group with a lifetime suntan trying to forge an identity and a life in the midst of the European American population which for decades had found them lacking the necessities of intellect and morality.[3]

From 1619 and right up until Emancipation, in fact, the identity question was complexified by the widely divergent statuses of Blacks. Because of the commonality of skin color, it was impossible to distinguish permanent from "temporary" African slaves (i.e., those who, like the European indentured servants, were working to purchase their freedom), or either of these from those Africans freed by their masters or those born to free parents. None of the aforementioned groups, by virtue of "blackness" alone, could be distinguished from escaped/"fugitive" slaves. And what about the products of miscegenation, where one parent was European (and therefore free), the other was an African slave, and the skin color was light black?

AFRICAN

Europeans in Colonial America used racial labels based on what was for them the critical category of enslavement. Thus, depending on status, Africans were referred to as "free" or "slave" (Franklin 1969). Where enslavement status was unknown, or where there was occasion to use a collective term for all Africans, they used "nigger" (not a racial epithet until the late Nineteenth Century) or "negro" (Portuguese adjective "black"; used by Fifteenth Century Portuguese slave traders; lowercased until the 1920's).

Although the small number of "free" Africans tended to refer to themselves as "colored," the most frequently used label, for "free" and "slave" alike, was African (Drake 1966). The first church was called the African Episcopal Church. The first formally organized self-help group was designated the Free African Society, followed by the African Educational and Benevolent Society, the Sons of Africa Society, and the African Association for Mutual Relief. The first Masonic Lodge was called African Lodge No. 459. And the writer of one of the first slave narratives referred to himself as "Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African" (1789).

The sociolinguistic reality these early Africans constructed reflected a distinct African consciousness. Since the African experience was still very immediate for most Blacks, regardless of their status, the possibility of returning to Africa haunted them constantly. Two years before the signing of the Declaration of

Independence, a group of African slaves formally petitioned the British governor of Massachusetts for permission to return to Africa (Drake 1987). The legendary folk hero Solomon (also of Toni Morrison's novel Song of Solomon) was believed to have the capacity to fly back to Africa--and hence, freedom. In fact, according to Asante (1988), what some scholars refer to as the African American pre-generic quest myth of freedom speaks originally to escape to Mother Africa out of bondage, with Canada and the northern United States coming in at a later historical stage. In any case, the ideological function of the label African served as a logical rallying point, since all Blacks had current or ancestral ties to Africa, whether they were temporary or permanent slaves, free men/women, fugitives, or mixed-bloods (albeit if the mother was a slave--the usual case--the offspring was also classified as a slave). African symbolized a common heritage, thus becoming a focal, unifying semantic for socially divergent groups of Africans, both creating and reinforcing the social construction of group solidarity and commonality.

COLORED

The Black condition became even more complexified after England's colonies became the United States. For one thing, slavery was not abolished, as the enslaved African population had anticipated, and as the free Africans--such as the leader Prince Hall, who fought at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill--had

believed. The Black Codes passed in the Eighteenth Century had abolished temporary slavery and instituted the "slave-for-life" status for all enslaved Africans, including their offspring, thus differentiating African slaves from the European indentured servant population (Franklin 1969). But 1776 brought about neither a repeal of these laws nor universal emancipation. Further, the costly, inefficient method of importing shiploads of human cargo across the abyss of the Middle Passage was gradually supplanted by the greater cost benefit system of local slave (re)production (enhanced on some plantations by the designation of certain males as breeders[4]). Yet the importation did not cease altogether, even after passage of the 1808 Slave Trade Act outlawing this transportation of human chattel. Then there were the free men/women who, though not slaves, were denied full citizenship and equal rights in the newly formed United States. Finally, the processes of individual manumission and miscegenation continued, each adding another layer of complexity to the status of people of African descent during the era between the Revolutionary and the Civil Wars. Could the same racial label be used for slaves fresh from Africa as for slaves born in the United States, some of whom were fifth and sixth generation descendants of Africans? (In some of the advertisements for runaway slaves, recently captured Africans were referred to as "<u>new</u> negroes" [Read 1939].) And if freed men/women of African descent were not full citizens of the newly-created American State, what should they be called? (Surely not African AMERICANS?!)

In the Nineteenth Century, the era of colored began, and the semantics of African declined in use and significance. By this era several generations of Blacks had been born on American soil, and with fewer arrivals from Africa, there was decreased cultural infusion into the slave community. Further, although colonization societies and movements to resettle the slaves in Africa persisted right up until the Civil War, the huge Black population--well over one million by 1800--made wholesale emigration of Blacks to Africa impractical, if not impossible. Most critically, both the free and the enslaved African populations were developing a new understanding of their role in the making of America (Frazier 1957). They had helped build the country through nearly two hundred years of free labor, and free Africans had participated both in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. The possibility for emancipation and citizenship was being created through their agitation and struggle, as well as through the efforts of European American Abolitionists. The Africans reasoned that the European American-dominated movements to resettle them in Africa would effectively disinherit them of their share of the American pie whose ingredients included not only their own blood, sweat, and tears, but that of many thousands gone.

Although colored had been used in the earlier period by some "free" Africans, it re-emerged in the Nineteenth Century as a racial referent for the entire Black group, now united in its collective move toward emancipation. There was the formation of the Pennsylvania Augustine Society "for the education of people of

colour." There was the publication of David Walker's radical Appeal (1829) calling for open rebellion against enslavement, which he addressed to the "Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular and very Expressly to Those of the United States of America." Abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass used colored (as well as negro) in his speeches and writings. Oral histories and folk narratives indicate the widespread use of colored among everyday Black people (Bennett 1961). Even into the early Twentieth Century, colored was the preferred racial designation. The oldest Civil Rights organization, founded in 1909, was (and still is) called the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

NEGRO

The shift away from colored to negro, and the subsequent campaign for its capitalization, began at the turn of the century and hit its full stride during the period of the two world wars. The initial signs of linguistic change were the American Negro Academy, founded in 1897, and the National Negro Business League, founded in 1900. Booker T. Washington and other leaders of this period used "negro" frequently in their speeches (Bennett 1967). The ideological vision was that with the spotlight on Europe and global struggles for freedom against fascism, and with "colored" soldiers (albeit in segregated regiments) shedding their blood for America, surely the still-unrealized quest for first-class

citizenship and racial equity would at last be fulfilled. The appropriate conceptual label to usher in this new phase was negro, which had come into widespread linguistic currency among European Americans, especially those in the North, the seat of capital and political power. The new language was needed to construct a new identity of dignity, respect and full citizenship, all of which had been lacking in the past.

Negro leaders of the 1920's launched a massive, Nation-wide campaign for the capitalization of negro in order to elevate the Portuguese slavery-time adjective to the symbolic level of dignity and respect accorded a racial label. The NAACP sent out over 700 letters to European American publishers and editors. Dr. W.E.B. DuBois wrote numerous editorial "Postscripts" in Crisis. Significant efforts were launched on local community and grass roots levels (e.g., the biweekly newsletter published by the Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments in Cincinnati, Ohio). Finally the European American press capitulated: "In our Style Book, Negro is now added to the list of words to be capitalized. It is not merely a typographical change, it is an act in recognition of racial self-respect for those who have been for generations in the "lower case" (New York Times, 7 Mar. 1930, 22). Although some Negroes continued to use colored, and although some Negro leaders and intellectuals--DuBois among them--balanced Negro with Black Smitherman 1986), Negro became the label of choice, dominating discourse by and about Negroes for over forty years.

BLACK

In 1966, Negro activist and leader Stokeley Carmichael issued a call for "Black power," and Negroes began to create a new sociolinguistic construction of reality. Several local and national conferences were held under the rubric of "Black Power" in 1966 and 1967 (Walters 1993). Symbolizing a new ideological phase in the Negro Experience, these conferences and their leadership called upon Negroes to abandon the "slavery-imposed name" (Bennett 1967).

The move from Negro to Black signalled an ideological shift, a repudiation of whiteness and the rejection of assimilation. The failure to embrace Blackness and to capitalize on the strengths of Black Culture and the Black Experience were reasoned to have stagnated the progress of the Civil Rights Movement. Only by being true to themselves and their heritage would Black people be able to harness the necessary power to liberate themselves. Freedom could not be achieved without a healthy racial consciousness, underscored by a strong belief in the collective Black Will to change the conditions of oppression. Thus it was imperative that Blacks eradicate the negativity and self-hatred of the Coloracracy, exemplified in the folk ditty, "If you white, you all right, if you brown, stick around, if you Black, git back."

The choice of a label that had traditionally been a way of calling a Negro "outa they name" now was being employed to purify Negroes of the idealization of white skin, white ideas, and white

values. Spreading throughout the national Black community, the newly constructed reality was captured in the popular, best-selling 1968 song by James Brown, "Say it loud: 'I'm Black, and I'm proud.'" It was a profoundly classic case of the semantic inversion characteristic of Black English Vernacular speakers.[5] Bad was truly turned on its head and made good as the celebration of "Black"--Black Culture, Black skin color, the Black Experience--became a rallying cry for unity, empowerment and self-definition.

Negro History Week, in existence since its founding by Dr. Carter G. Woodson in 1926, became Black History Week (and eventually Black History Month). The language announced Black people's right to chart their destiny; it conveyed their determined will for freedom and equity on their own terms. Most critically, the new racial semantics served a cathartic function as the national Black community purged itself of age-old scripts of self-hatred and denial. This period of catharsis was necessary, for it enabled African Americans to come to grips with centuries of much ado about the nothingness of skin color.

AFRICAN AMERICAN

In 1977 (in the first edition of Smitherman 1986), I stated:

> The semantic designations 'Afro-American' and 'African American' accompanied the 1966 rise of 'Black' but have yet to achieve its widespread general usage in the Black community...The...terms denote the reality of the double consciousness and dual cultural heritage of Black folk: part Africa, part America. Perhaps the more frequent use of Afro-American and African American awaits the complete healing of the psychic wounds of the Black past. (pp. 41-42)

That healing has now been completed. It is time to evolve to a new ideological plateau.

The call for African American is a call for a new paradigm in the unceasing quest for freedom. The hard-won progress of the previous generation of struggle is being eroded by national policies and court decisions that would turn back the hands of time. At the same time, the freedom struggle on the Continent--e.g., South Africa--and in the Diaspora outside of the United States--e.g., Grenada--has taken center stage in the world. It is time to redefine and reconceptualize the identity of the African in North America.

Though minimizing the significance of language, Dr. Manning Marable, prolific African American scholar and newspaper columnist, addresses the domestic issues that have triggered the current call for a new racial semantic:

> The important question, therefore, is not the terminology per se, but why the phrase has emerged now...The decade of the 1980's is...bleak:...the massive white electoral mandates for the Reagan/Bush administrations, which campaigned successfully on programs of thinly veiled racism; the growth of urban youth violence, Black-on-Black homicides, high unemployment and drug proliferation; and the fragmentation of many Black social institutions such as the Black Church....The combination of destructive socio-economic and political forces from without and the social decay and chaos from within have prompted a looking inward....(1989, 72)

Writer Gloria Naylor, addressing the internationalist domain evoked by the call for African American, notes that "to call ourselves that, we would have to forge true ties with other people of color" (quoted in Anon 1989, 80). Dr. Dorothy I. Height, President of the

National Council of Negro Women, makes a similar point when she says "It is a recognition that we've always been African and American, but we are now going to...make a unified effort to identify with our African brothers and sisters" (quoted in Anon 1989, 80). Perhaps Jesse Jackson made the most eloquent and succinct statement about the international scope of the new label when he said "Black tells you about skin color and what side of town you live on. African American evokes discussion of the world" (quoted in Wilkerson 1989). In this period of reassessment and reevaluation of the rapidly deteriorating Black condition, the new semantic constructs an identity of unified global struggle against race domination, linking Africans in North America with Continental Africans and with other Diasporic African groups. For a people grappling with disempowerment and its tragic effects on entire Black communities across the Nation, the term provides the security of "I am somebody" by reaffirming the origin and cultural continuity of our African heritage. At the same time, African American calls attention to four hundred years of contributions to the making of America and legitimates the political and economic demand for equity. The "American" identity of African Americans has been sustained and continues to be embraced in the form that Walker articulated over a century and a half ago, stating in his Appeal, "Men who are resolved to keep us in eternal wretchedness are also bent on sending us to Liberia...America is more our country than it is the whites--we have enriched it with our BLOOD AND TEARS" (1829, 65).

The call for African American has been issued. What has been the response?

There are several noteworthy institutional examples of its use. Atlanta, Chicago and Detroit, three urban school districts with predominantly African American student populations, have adopted the term in their curricula and are encouraging teachers to use it. Tennis great Arthur Ashe titled his 1988 book A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African American Athlete. WWR and WLIB, both large Black-oriented radio stations in New York City, use the term, as well as New York's first African American mayor, David Dinkins. According to Joseph Hollander, Director of Publications for The Modern Language Association, African American is used in most cases, but Black and other terms are acceptable as long as they are appropriate (personal communication 1991). Three of the largest African American newspapers in the country now use the term: New York's Amsterdam News; Chicago's Daily Defender; and Detroit's Michigan Chronicle. In the November, 1990 Motown television special, in which Motown celebrated its thirty-year history in the recording and entertainment industry, all of the entertainers who participated in the narration used African American consistently throughout the entire program (a few doing so quite self-consciously).

The NAACP, which was in the forefront of the movement from colored to Negro in the 1920's, has adopted a wait-and-see posture on the current linguistic movement. According to Dr. Benjamin Hooks, Executive Director, "....we will neither oppose nor endorse

the use of the term 'African-American.' This does not indicate a lack of concern, but rather an abiding respect for the sound judgment of our people, who, on their own, will reach a consensus, just as they have done in the past"(1989).

THE PEOPLE SPEAK: FIVE-CITY PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY

Sample and Method. In an attempt to assess the "sound judgment of our people," I included a question about African American in a language attitude instrument designed to elicit opinions about foreign language teaching in the public schools and "English-Only" legislation (Smitherman, 1992). This survey research project involved five cities with large African American populations. It was conducted between May and September, 1989. The cities were Atlanta, Chicago, Cincinnati, Detroit, and Philadelphia. The 667 respondents included both African and European Americans, 512 of whom answered the African American question.

In Chicago, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia, the data (hereafter C1), were collected using written questionnaires which the respondents completed themselves. They were selected using a sample-of-convenience approach. Thus while the results are informative, the power of the claims we could make is somewhat limited by the sampling procedures.[6] The Detroit and Atlanta surveys (hereafter C2) were administered to scientifically selected

samples, using census data, ZIP codes, and computer-generated telephone numbers. These data were collected through telephone surveys by a staff of interviewers trained in survey research techniques. Thus there is greater confidence in these results.

The African American question was posed in the following form: "There is a lot of talk about what different racial and ethnic groups should be called. Do you think the term "African American" should replace the term "Black" as the name for Black people in the United States?" Respondents were then asked to explain their answers.

Results. When all respondents are considered, results show that anywhere from slightly more than one-third to one-half favor the shift to African American. In the C1 sample (n = 210), opinions were split exactly evenly, whereas in the C2 sample, the scientifically selected group (n = 302), only 33 percent favored the shift.

When we consider only the African American respondents, results are somewhat, but not significantly, different from results for all respondents. In the C1 group, 43% favored the shift, and in the C2 sample, 37% favored the shift. (See Table 1.)

TABLE 1

Opinions About Use of African American
(African Americans only; n = 264)

	C1 Sample	C2 Sample
YES	43%	37%
NO	57%	63%

African Americans gave three broad explanations for approval of the proposed change: (1) identification with Africa/dual heritage, for example "It tells our origin and cultural identity"; (2) inadequacy of a color label (e.g., "Black is a color, not a race" and "Colors belong in a crayon box"); (3) aesthetic quality of African American (e.g., "I can't explain it, it just has a better sound to it").

Three types of explanations were given for disapproval of the linguistic shift: (1) lack of identification with Africa (e.g., "Blacks are not African" and "We are more American than African; we have been here too long"; (2) syllabic density of African American (e.g., "It takes too long to say it and it's too much trouble"); (3) semantic change unnecessary and irrelevant (e.g., "Every ten to fifteen years it's something new. However you want to say it, we are still Black").

As anticipated, the most frequently given reason in support of African American was its reflection of the African past (46.4%). Also as anticipated, the negative version of this same reason was given by a large percentage of those who did not favor the term (26.3%). Typical responses were, "I wasn't born in Africa, I was born in Illinois" and "What do they mean about African American? By now we have no African in us." However, among those who said "No," a far larger number (55.8%) indicated that a name change was insignificant and irrelevant to changing the Black condition. (See Table 2.)

TABLE 2

Approval/Disapproval of Linguistic Shift
(C2 sample, African Americans only; n = 194)

Reasons for Approval of Shift

1.	Identification with Africa/dual heritage	46.4%
2.	Inadequacy of a color label	17.4%
3.	Aesthetic quality of African American	36.2%

Reasons for Disapproval of Shift

1.	Lack of identification with Africa	26.3%
2.	Syllabic density of African American	9.5%
3.	Semantic change unnecessary and irrelevant	55.8%
4.	Other	8.4%

If we look at the results by age and sex, some significant interactions emerge. In the C1 sample, respondents 21 and under were more favorably disposed to the shift than those over 21. (See Table 3.) Although age was not significant in the other cities, I think the results are indicative of a trend among African American youth. The semantic movement parallels the re-emerging 1960's-style nationalism and Afrocentric consciousness taking place in youth culture. Witness the Malcolm X revival, the political messages of popular rap groups like Public Enemy, the wearing of medallions embossed with the map of Africa, African-style haircuts, and reinvigorated campus activism.

TABLE 3

Opinions About Use of African American By Age
(C1 sample only; p <.02)

	21 & under	22-30	31-40	Over 40
YES	55%	24%	37%	29%
NO	45%	76%	63%	71%

Sex was also significant, but only in Detroit. In that city, African American women were more overwhelmingly opposed to the semantic shift than African American men. (See Table 4.) Although I can offer no definitive explanation to account for this difference, recent scholars in both African American and Women's Studies (e.g., Gates 1988; Spillers 1983) have made a convincing case for the uniqueness of the African American woman's consciousness and experience. They have advanced the need for research to disaggregate what Toni Morrison has called the "invented lives" of African American women from the work done on African Americans and European American women (quoted in Giddings 1984). The finding from this survey lies in this general direction and suggests the need for further study of the views of African American women.

TABLE 4

African American Males and Females on the Linguistic Shift
(Detroit only; p <.01)

	Females	Males
YES	28%	51%
NO	72%	49%

Although the focal point of this analysis was to get an index of the "sound judgement of our people" on the semantic issue, to the extent that race may be a significant factor in my results, it deserves comment. In the C2 sample, African Americans approved of the semantic shift more than European Americans, but not to as great a degree as we had predicted. (See Table 5.) One

explanation for this difference is that African Americans have a lot more at stake in the naming controversy. Some European Americans might simply object to the change because it makes their lives slightly more complicated (in that they have to learn something new which is personally unimportant to them). These differences between European and African Americans notwithstanding, the Black group clearly has the power to define and name itself and to compel mainstream acceptance and usage for any label it chooses as has been demonstrated both in the shift from colored to Negro (with the capital, no less) and from Negro to Black. In fact, the general response to the issue by European Americans in the survey is typified by the following statement from one respondent: "If that's what they want to be called, it's okay with me." However, for African Americans the issue is about the construction of identity through Nommo, an African concept that has survived in African American culture as a belief in the power of the word--"the awareness that the word alone alters the world" (Jahn 1961, 125). Racial group identity, whatever the paradigm that emerges, will dictate strategies, tactics, policies, programs, and, in general, shape the direction of the struggle in the Twenty-First Century. This is no small matter; one does not make such a fundamental shift without internal debate, deliberation, and struggle. Edelin, Jackson, and others in national leadership have sounded the clarion call for the debate to begin.

TABLE 5

Opinions About Use of African American by Race
(C2 sample only; p <.05)

	African Americans	European Americans	Total
YES	36.6%	25.3%	33.0%
NO	63.4%	74.7%	67.0%

As far as I was able to ascertain, no other survey of the current naming issue has been reported in the literature to date, although at least three opinion polls have been undertaken by the popular press.[7] Time reported that, although its survey was too small to be statistically valid, lt did show that the "name change has made some headway," with 26% of the Blacks polled favoring African American (Lacayo and Monroe 1989). The Washington Post-ABC News poll indicates that only 34% of the Blacks surveyed approved of African American (Specter 1990). However, Specter also notes "in the late 1960s, a majority of both races also favored Negro over Black." Finally, The Michigan Chronicle reports on a small sample survey of students attending historically Black colleges, indicating that a majority favor the shift from Black to African American (17 June 1989, 3A). This compares with the results of the present survey in terms of the positive responses from young (age 21 and under) respondents, most of whom were college students.

CONCLUSION

Given insufficient empirical data on African American views on the proposed terminological shift, the results of the five-city survey are a significant beginning. We can conclude that at least one-third of African Americans are in favor of the name change and that support is perhaps strongest among African American youth, particularly those in college. However, that support is probably weakest among African American women, who continue, as they have historically, to be a potent factor in social change. The obstacles to be overcome to broaden the base of terminological change are the lack of a feeling of connectedness to Africa and the perception that, as one Sistuh put it, "this language thang ain bout too much."

Further empirical studies are warranted to assess the impact of the current linguistic movement and its relationship to the historical semantics of race. African American historians and political theorists contend that, in times of severe racial crisis, the name issue re-emerges as a call for re-examination of the status of African Americans. This reassessment forces a necessary and widespread discussion of the question, "Where do we go from here?" Bennett states: "In periods of reaction and extreme stress, Black people usually turn inward. They begin to re-define themselves and they begin to argue seriously about names" (1967, 50). The current period is a singularly dramatic manifestation of this "turning inward," paralleled perhaps only by the post-

Reconstruction period, "one of the whitest times in American history" (Bennett 1967, 50). Thus the linguistic debate raised by Edelin, and carried forth into the popular press by Jackson, is an appropriate and historically logical call to action.

Baldwin (1981) and others have argued that the semantics of Black are a unique--and historically inappropriate--American-style invention. The ethnic identities of Africans in North America were eradicated so that Ibos, Yorubas, Hausas, and other African ethnic groups were robbed of their distinctiveness, and everybody just became "Black." By the same token, all Europeans just became "white." While this analysis fits the Black condition, it fails to recognize that the "white" race created in America retained its European ethnic identity. In fact, "Black" as a name for African Americans is asymmetrical with naming practices for all other groups in the United States. For these other groups, the term employed denotes land of origin--Polish Americans, Italian Americans, Hispanic Americans, German Americans, Asian Americans, and so on. African American brings the "Black" race into semantic line with these other ethnolinguistic traditions.[8]

Our survey results and the press polls, with the promising exceptions of the African American college students in The Michigan Chronicle survey, and the 21 and under group in Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and Chicago, indicate that current leaders have their work cut out for them. As with the shift from Negro to Black, it is the everyday people who must rise to the semantic challenge and rally around the new paradigmatic shift. Yet as the lexicosemantic

history presented here indicates, the current issue of racial labelling is but a variation on a familiar theme: the unfinished business of forging an identity and a life for Africans in North America.

As an African American womanist linguist, it is clear to me that this is not a debate about semantics at the expense of addressing the plight of the community, as some intellectuals fear. Rather, this new racial designation can lead to the construction of an identity to facilitate the creation of policy, tactics, strategies, and programs to redress that plight--that is, the use of language to create a new theory of reality. As Ramona Edelin so eloquently put it (quoted in Anon 1989, 76):

> It is our obligation to reconstruct our culture at this critical point in history so that we can move forward and not be satisfied with one or two people rising to the surface.... Calling ourselves African American is the first step in the cultural offensive. Our cultural renaissance can change our lot in the nation and around the world.

NOTES

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1. Countee Cullen (1903-1946) was a Harlem Renaissance poet whose "Heritage" is considered "perhaps the finest statement of the then-popular [1920s] alien-and-exile theme in Black writing" (Davis and Redding 1971, 323). Italics appear in the original poem.

2. The program was aired on January 16, 1989. Panelists were poet Sonia Sanchez, Temple University; political scientist James Turner, Cornell University; and the author.

3. I employ the term European American to refer to the "white" population in the United States. Just as Black, an adjective, a color term only, is an inappropriate sociolinguistic construction for Africans in America, so too is the label white inappropriate for Europeans in America. Further, shifting from white to European American resolves the seeming contradiction of capitalizing Black while lower-casing white, a practice I have used in the past and have defended on the following grounds. First, Black as a racial designation replaced Negro, and Negro was capitalized (at least since 1930),whereas white was not. Second, for people of African descent in America, Black functions to designate race and ethnicity because the slave trade and U.S. enslavement practices made it impossible for "Blacks" to trace their ethnic origins in Africa. This has not been the case for Europeans in the U.S., who typically have labelled themselves German, Italian, English, Irish, Polish, etc., according to their European ethnicity. In fact, it was not until the rise of Black that European Americans raised questions about the lower-casing of white.

4. While historically women (African American and European American) have been constructed as sex objects, deriving their worth from the number of children they produce, it was only in the slave community that men were encouraged to be fruitful and multiply, its being a fairly common practice for masters to designate certain males as breeders, nurturing their promiscuity on the plantation so as to have as many female slaves pregnant as possible. The point is especially significant in light of current discussions about the supposed weakness of the Black family, "fatherless" homes, and the "irresponsibility" of African American men.

5. "Inversion," turning a negative mainstream linguistic or social concept into its opposite--e.g., bad = "good"--was first used to describe the language practices of Black English Vernacular speakers by Holt (1972). "Semantic inversion" (Smitherman 1986) is believed to have its origins in West African language use (Turner 1949; Dalby 1969).

6. Although self-administered questionnaires can be problematic--e.g., low return rate among both African and European Americans--there are often particular problems when racial identification of African Americans is requested. In the C1 sample, 84 of the 210 persons who answered the African American question refused to give their race, either implicitly (e.g., through omission) or explicitly (e.g.,"Why does it matter?" "What difference does it make?" and similar comments written on several questionnaires). Based on the distribution points for these questionnaires, about 60 of the 84 are believed to be African American.

7. See, however, John Baugh's article in the issue of American Speech in which this article first appeared. On 29 Jan. 1991, while this article was under editorial review, The New York Times (A19) published the results of a national poll by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a research organization specializing in African American political affairs. Based on a survey of 759 African Americans across the country, results indicate that, depending on region, anywhere from 22-28% of African Americans outside the South favor African American over Black; in the South only 15% favor the term. Among African American intellectuals, the Joint Center has long been lauded for its work in Black politics. Typically, though, as in the case with Gallup and other political pollsters, samples are based on registered voters, thereby excluding many speakers of what John Baugh calls "Black street speech" (1983), as well as many young adults, among whom "voter apathy" is perhaps strongest. I'm raising a question about a type of class bias in public polls involving African Americans. We tried to control for this with a sampling frame designed to include college students in the C1 group, and in the C2 sample, by targeting areas populated by working, unworking, and under-class African Americans. The success of Jackson's "rainbow coalition" politics in mobilizing large numbers of disempowered and young African Americans demonstrates the latent power of the "root culture" (Pasteur and Toldson 1982) to impact on national politics.

8. Note that I do not hyphenate African American. The notion of "hyphenated Americans" is an older expression that most "hyphenated Americans" cringe at because it (the term and the hyphen) suggests a hybrid, lacking in authenticity. Note that I also do not hyphenate European American. Of course the only (nationally) authentic, i.e. indigenous, group is the Native American/Indian. By a similar line of reasoning, I no longer

advocate AfroAmerican (nor its current alternative, AfriAmerican), with or without the hyphen. Both smack of something hybrid, truncated, cut off--"Afro," "Afri," but not "African."

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